



The Politics of Bodo Socio-Cultural Representation Before 1967

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Abstract

Bodo is one of the major tribes of Assam, and the aspirations for autonomy among the Bodos represent a significant issue in the region's politics. The socio-political consciousness of tribal communities, particularly the Bodos, began to emerge during the colonial period; however, the issue of autonomy was not initially raised. Instead, memoranda submitted by the Bodos to the Simon Commission, or Indian Statutory Commission, on 4 January 1929, expressed that "Bodos regarded themselves as Assamese and part and parcel of Assamese society and vehemently opposed the transfer of Goalpara district to Bengal." The paper puts forth the justification of going for a separate and distinct identity carved out of Assamese identity.

Keywords: Bodo, Politics, Assam, Tribal.

I. Introduction

India is a land of composite culture and unity in diversity. Multiculturalism has been recognised and guaranteed by the Constitution of India. The gap between theory and practice remains a significant concern, even after the creation of states based on the recommendations of the State Reorganisation Commission. In India, the creation of new states is still an ongoing process. North East India (NEI) is no exception to this trend. Carving out territories from Assam led to the creation of several states, including Nagaland, Mizoram, Meghalaya, and Arunachal Pradesh.

Socio-Political consciousness amongst the tribal in general and Bodos in particular awoke during the colonial rule, but the question of autonomy was not raised, instead memorandums submitted by the Bodos before the Simon Commission or Indian Statutory Commission in January 4, 1929 stated, "Bodos regarded themselves as Assamese and the part and parcel of Assamese society and vehemently opposed the transfer of Goalpara district to Bengal."

Historical injustices, feelings of deprivation, and fears of extinction led to the formation of a tribal political party known as the All-Assam Plains Tribal League in 1933. This party aimed to safeguard and protect the rights of the tribal communities. Following the Government of India Act 1935, the League successfully reserved four seats in the Legislative Assembly and one seat in the Legislative Council. All four Assembly seats and the single Council seat were won by the Tribal League, with elected members pledging to uphold the rights of the tribal people. The party occasionally supported the Muslim League, led by Sir Sadullah, and at other times aligned with the Congress, headed by Gopinath Bordoloi, which enabled the establishment of Tribal Belts and Blocks.

After independence, the leaders of the Tribal League either joined the Congress or abstained from active politics, leading to the League's transformation into a non-political organization known as the All-Assam Tribal Sangha. This change occurred without raising any questions about autonomy, as the leaders consistently prioritised the concept of a greater Assam. Consequently, a political vacuum emerged among the tribal communities following the disintegration of the Tribal League, which had previously served as their platform to voice demands in the Assembly.

In this grim situation, Mrs. Indira Gandhi, then Prime Minister of India, announced that Assam would be reorganised on the basis of a federal structure during the All-Party Hills Leaders Conference (APHLC) on February 13, 1967. This announcement prompted some Bodo youths and intellectuals from Kokrajhar district to convene a meeting to discuss the implications of the announcement and the possibility of forming a political party. After a detailed discussion, the meeting decided to establish an ad hoc committee under the name and style of the Plains Tribal Council of Assam (PTCA). This committee later evolved into the Plains Tribal Council of Assam,



with Biruchan Doley as President, Samar Brahma Choudhury as Vice Chairman, and Charan Narzary as General Secretary.

The **Plains Tribal Council of Assam (PTCA)** is a political party in the Indian state of Assam, founded on **February 27, 1967**, to advocate for the rights and development of the plain tribes. The PTCA was formed with the primary demand for a separate Union Territory for the Boro and other plain tribes, to be named "Udayachal". It was the first political party for the plain tribes and played a significant role in raising political consciousness and advocating for their rights and safeguards within the Assam Legislative Assembly. At the same time, the All-Bodo Students' Union (ABSU) was formed on February 15, 1967, in Kokrajhar to protect the identity, culture, and language of the Bodo people under the leadership of Banerwar Basumatary as president and Kanakeswar Narzary as general secretary. The movement for Udayachal eventually lost steam due to internal conflicts and the rise of other groups like the All-Bodo Students' Union (ABSU), which launched a movement for a separate "Bodoland" state, ultimately leading to the formation of the Bodoland Autonomous Council and later the Bodoland Territorial Region (BTR). While the party was historically significant, its movement for Udayachal was ultimately unsuccessful, and the party largely demised as a major political force after the Bodo accords. Issues concerning the non-Bodo tribes within the BTR region remain a point of conflict in the current political scenario.

Objectives of the Study:

- (i) To know about Bodo politics.
- (ii) To know about Bodo politics before 1967.

Methodology and Data Collection:

The researcher has adopted several methodologies to collect the data from various sources. Both primary and secondary data have been collected. For primary data, the researcher has interviewed some of the Bodo intellectuals and elderly individuals of the village through face-to-face interaction. For secondary data, it has been collected from various newspapers, journals, magazines, etc.

II. Literature Review:

Rituraj Basumatary, in his books *Bodoland Movement (1986–2020)* and *Beyond (and related works like A Brief History of Udayachal and the Bodoland Movement)*, characterises Bodo politics

as a continuous struggle for self-assertion and ethnic identity. Basumatary traces the movement from its early roots in the 1930s and the formation of the Plains Tribals Council of Assam (PTCA) in 1967 to more contemporary developments. He views the movement as a necessary response to political insecurity and social discrimination by the state government.

III. Discussion:

Boro ChatraSanmilani

The establishment of the Bodo ChatraSanmilani in 1919 significantly influenced the conscience of the new generation of western-educated Bodo youths in the state. Bodo students and gentlemen from various districts of Assam, including Goalpara, Nagaon, Kamrup, Lakhimpur, and even West Bengal, participated in the Sanmilani's annual sessions. Over time, these sessions evolved into a platform for fostering unity among the dispersed Bodo population across the country, enabling them to collaborate on the advancement of Bodo language and literature. Previously known as Goalpara Jilla Bodo ChatraSanmilani, the organization was founded through the efforts of educated Bodo youths, such as Rupnath Brahma, Satish Chandra Basumatary, Modaram Brahma, and Iswan Mushahary. For the convenient of literary study based on the periodic phase, the rise of Bodo language and literature has been classified into four distinct periods:

1. The era of missionary began from the publication of book entitled- *An Outline Grammar of Kachari or Mech Language* by Rev. S. Endle in 1884, up to the formation of Bodo ChatraSanmilani in 1919.
2. The Bihar Muga or Bihar age commenced in 1920, right from the preparation for the publication of the periodical, *Bihar* in 1924 and continued up to the publication of another magazine known as *Alongbar*.
3. The *Alongbar Muga* or *Alongbar* age started in 1938 with the publication of the periodical *Alongbar* magazine and lasted up to 1951.
4. The period after the formation of the Bodo Sahitya Sabha in 1952 and onwards is regarded as the modern period of the Bodo literature.

Critically analyzing the literary development of the Bodo language, Riju Kumar Brahma has divided it into following the three phases:

- (1) Early phase



- (a) Religious worship hymn (b) Oral literature
- (2) Middle Phase
 - (a) Missionary and non-missionary literature
 - (b) Renaissance of Bodo literature (from 1919 to 1952)
- (3) Modern Phase (from 1952 onwards)ⁱ

Bibar Period (1920-1937)

According to Monoranjan Lahary, the periodisation of the Bibar age is identified as spanning from 1920 to 1937. This period is considered the foundation of Bodo literature, and the majority of Bodo literary critics accept this periodisation as defining the Bibar age. Following the establishment of the Bodo ChatraSanmilan, efforts began to create the Bibar magazine. The magazine was published between 1924 and 1925, consisting of a total of eight issues, with Satish Chandra Basumatary serving as its first chief editor. The primary aim of the Bibar magazine was to enrich the Bodo language and literature while fostering socio-cultural awareness within contemporary Bodo society. The magazine featured a multilingual format, with articles written in Bodo, Assamese, and Bengali. Additionally, Satish Chandra Basumatary, who held the position of General Secretary, contributed his editorial remarks in Bengali.

Amongst the architects of Bibar period Satish Chandra Basumatary is regarded as the first important person who always followed the path of the truth. He was made the chief editor of the magazine Bibar and Jenthoka.

Soon after the publication of Bibar, the Jenthoka was first published in 1925.

Alongbar Period:

The Alongbar period or Alongbar period of Bodo literature marked with the periodical publication of Alongbar magazine in 1938 which was jointly edited by Pramad Chandra Brahma and Khagendra Nath Brahma which continued upto 1951 before the birth of Bodo Sahitya Sabha.

Bodo Mahasanmilani:

Gurudev Kalicharan Brahma's place of primordial importance in Bodo history today rests not only on his role as a preacher of the Brahma religion but also on his role as one of the greatest and earliest reformers of Bodo society. Owing to severe ills and unhygienic practices, the Bodos were

disliked by the other communities and treated like untouchables. Being simplistic by nature and often ignorant and uneducated, they were generally treated like the pariahs of the society.

At this critical juncture, the much-needed requirement was an able leader to hold on to the reins and guide the course of this stagnant society. And Gurudev fulfilled the same. It is rather doubtful if anybody could have done it better, more efficiently and more successfully than him. With a capacity for feeling the pulse of his community and a profound comprehension of the drawbacks that were maligning the image of the Bodo society, he had realised long ago that reformation was a must. If reformation cannot be initiated, this community will soon disintegrate, lose its identity, and perish, unable to meet the challenges that newer times will pose.

He spread the Brahma religion among them, believing it was best for their community and could eliminate the bad practices. Thus, Gurudev, with utmost zeal, dedication and a sense of purpose, carried the message of the Brahma religion far and wide among his people. The Brahma religion, indeed, went a long way to reform the Bodos, but a secular movement was required that would side-by-side complement the religion toward fostering unity and reformation, which was the prerequisite then. Gurudev, along with a few other Bodo leaders and prominent personalities who thought on similar lines, joined hands to convene the first Bodo Mahasanmilani. It was in 1921 that Gurudev, with the help of educated young boys and girls, organised the first Bodo Mahasanmilani at Bhaoragury under the Gossaigaon Police Station of the then- Goalpara district.

A coordination committee was established for the first Boro Mahasanmilani, with Rupnath Brahma serving as the secretary and Gurudev Kalicharan Brahma as the chief organiser. Active participation came from educated Bodo youths, including Birmarayan Brahma, Jamadar Brahma, Satish Chandra Basumatary, Malsing Brahma Chaudhury, Kalicharan Brahma Jr, and Bijoy Singha Brahma. Jadav Chandra Khakhlary highlighted the glorious past of the Bodos, remarking that they once ruled over all of Assam. However, he lamented that the current situation for the Bodos stands in stark contrast; they have been relegated to the background and are now considered one of the most backward communities in the region. This situation has been exacerbated by illiteracy and ignorance among their ranks. He issued a clarion call to the Bodo community to unite and pursue progress by shedding ignorance and embracing education and



knowledge. This, he asserted, is the key to a bright future for the Bodos, allowing them to safeguard their identity and resist fading away amidst the pressures of time and modernisation.

The Boro Mahasanmilani for the first time provided a platform where the problems plaguing the Bodo society were taken up for discussion and a comprehensive declaration was adopted for the upliftment of the society and to do away with the social ills.

The following resolutions were adopted by the first Bodo Mahasanmilani:

1. It was resolved that the Bodo Mahasanmilani be observed annually henceforth.
2. It was resolved that an Executive Committee be formed for the organization of the Sanmilani.
3. It was resolved that action plans for the Bodo women be taken up.
4. It was resolved that a magazine be published for the spread of knowledge and creative writings among the Bodo boys and girls.
5. It was resolved that actions be initiated for the establishment of primary and middle schools in the Bodo dominated areas. Even the Bodo girls should seek education in these schools.
6. It was resolved that the use of liquor in marriage and other social ceremonies be stopped.
7. The fee to be paid during a daughter's marriage stands fixed at Rs. 51/- only and any body found violating this be penalized.

Gurudev was pleased with the success of the Bodo Mahasanmilani and believed that the adoption of meaningful resolutions would significantly contribute to eliminating the social evils within society, paving the way for progress. Practising these resolutions would eventually garner respect from other communities. Gurudev recognised that the Bodos have remained a stagnant society, resistant to necessary changes over time, which has led to their backwardness, ignorance, neglect, and decline. This stagnation explains their continued adherence to outdated and redundant social customs, manners, and traditions. Until they are willing to renounce these practices—such as excessive alcohol consumption, pig rearing, forced marriages, animal sacrifices, internal conflicts, and hedonistic religious rituals—they will not gain respect or achieve a higher status in society. It is only by rejecting these detrimental behaviours that they can usher in modernisation and progress. Thus,

Gurudev envisioned the Bodo Mahasanmilani as a catalyst for preaching, spreading, and propagating the Brahma religion, which holds the greatest potential for addressing these negative aspects of Bodo society.

Unfortunately, most of these resolutions of the first Bodo Mahasanmilani remained unfulfilled due to various reasons. It was in 1925, not after one but after four years that the Second Bodo Mahasanmilani was held. This time Rangia was chosen as the venue, and Jadunath Khakhlary, the elder brother of Jadav Chandra Khakhlary, the first President of Boro Mahasanmilani was the President.

Gurudev played a significant role in this endeavour, and his followers, disciples, and the youth extended their support. Among the various issues discussed in this second meeting was their inability to fulfil the declarations adopted in the first. Those resolutions were thoroughly revisited, and the action report from the previous meeting was considered. Many expressed concern regarding the Boro Mahasanmilani's failure to achieve its resolutions. As a result, those resolutions were adopted once more, with a few additional ones appended to the original.

These are the three extra resolutions that were adopted in the second Boro Mahasanmilani:

1. It was resolved that henceforth, pigs should not be reared by the Bodos, as they are unhygienic, spoil the surroundings and cause diseases.
2. Both boys and girls must be provided educations equally, only then can the Bodo society progress.
3. It was resolved that the Brahma religion shall be the one and only religion that will be practiced by the Bodos, since Bathou and other religions that had been followed by them so far have failed to bring about any improvement in their lives.

In 1929, after a span of four years, the third Boro Mahasanmilani was organised at Roumari village near Bongaigaon. Jadav Chandra Khakhlary, who had presided over the first Boro Mahasanmilani, was once again elected as president. It is noteworthy that, in addition to the Bodos of Assam, individuals from the neighbouring state of West Bengal also attended this gathering. Prominent Bodo intellectuals such as Katimal Brahma, Narapati Basumatary, Subedar Belbungram Kachari, Birendra Narayan Mandal, Gopal Ujir, Balichand Karji, Satish Chandra Basumatary, Malsing Brahma Chaudhury, Shyamacharan Brahma, Kalicharan Brahma Jr, and Banabasu Kachari participated in this congregation. Importantly, the third Boro



Mahasanimilani was not limited to members of this community alone; well-known figures such as Ambikagiri Roy Chaudhury, Nilmani Phukan, and Mahadev Sarma, all from non-Bodo communities, also took part in this event.

The third Boro Mahasanimilani besides adopting the resolutions passed by the last two sessions additionally took up a few more, which are:

1. It was resolved that the consumption of liquor be stopped and volunteers would move from village to village to keep an eye on this and even break the utensils used for making the country liquor.
2. It was resolved that to ensure the honour of the Bodos, womenfolk be prevented from going to public places in unclean dresses.
3. It was resolved that animal sacrifices are banned in the Bodo society and only the Brahma religion be accepted as their religion.

However, there was one issue that was particularly close to Gurudev's heart, and he was eager for a resolution to be passed at the Roumari session of the Boro Mahasanimilani. Unfortunately, due to the strong opposition from the majority of the Bodos, it could not be adopted. This issue concerned the abolition of the musical instruments known as the kham, siphung, and jotha. During that congregation, Gurudev raised the topic of disallowing these three instruments, arguing that their use in religious ceremonies and yogyahutis, rather than aiding concentration on God, only served to distract both the devotee and the priest. Consequently, he appealed to the participants of the third Boro Mahasanimilani to take concrete steps towards their abolition, and if necessary, to pass a resolution to that effect.

However, Nepal Chandra Brahmachari, popularly known as Fwrlang Babaji, who hailed from the Roumari Jyoti Ashram and attended the Boro Mahasanimilani, opposed Gurudev's recommendation vehemently. He engaged in a heated argument with Gurudev, emphatically asserting that such a proposal was not only misguided but also dangerous, as its long-term consequences could potentially lead to the erasure of the Bodo identity as a distinct community. Nepal Chandra Brahmachari stressed that the kham, siphung, and jotha were integral to Bodo culture, and thus, it was crucial to incorporate them into cultural programmes to preserve their unique identity. Many educated Bodos, including Rupnath Brahma and Satish Chandra Basumatary, who were otherwise staunch admirers and followers of

Gurudev, sided with Nepal Chandra Brahmachari on this issue and rejected Gurudev's suggestion.

Gurudev ultimately had to relent in the face of strong opposition and withdrew his proposal. Nevertheless, he proceeded to request that the use of kham, siphung, and jotha be restricted to cultural occasions only and that their use in religious ceremonies be discontinued, as it distracts the attention of the people. He maintained that singing, dancing, and drinking should be avoided during religious occasions, believing that our focus should be solely on God. Otherwise, the purpose of religion is compromised. He consented to the retention of kham, siphung, and jotha, acknowledging them as integral to Bodo culture, while ultimately seeking to limit their use and remove them from the context of religion.

Role of Tribal League:

The Simon Commission was appointed in November 1927 by the British Conservative government under Stanley Baldwin to report on the working of the Indian constitution established by the Government of India Act of 1919. The commission consisted of seven members – four Conservatives, two Labourites and one Liberal – under the joint chairmanship of the distinguished Liberal lawyer Sir John Simon and Clement Attlee, the future prime minister. Its composition met with a storm of criticism in India because Indians were excluded. The commission was boycotted by the Indian National Congress and most other Indian political parties. It, nevertheless, published a two-volume report, mainly the work of Simon.

The arrival of the Simon Commission in 1927 provided a crucial opportunity for change. The Commission reached Assam in 1928 and operated in the state until January 1929.

The purpose of the Commission was to investigate the functioning of the government system, the advancement of education, and the development of representative institutions in British India, as well as to report on the feasibility of establishing responsible government. A Royal Notification, issued across the Indian Domain on 6 March 1928, called for memoranda to be submitted to the Commission. The Boro community also submitted memoranda through various organisations. Gurudev Kalicharan Brahma led a delegation from the Goalpara District Community, while Jadav Khaklari, as the Secretary of the Assam Kachari Juba Sanmelan, submitted another memorandum on behalf of the entire Boro community of Assam. These memoranda urged the government to grant separate electorates for the



Boro-Kachari community in both the Assembly and local board elections and to provide compulsory free primary education for students from this community.

Additionally, the memoranda appealed to the government against transferring Assam to Bengal province and recommended establishing a single-chamber ministry for Assam. However, the submissions from the Boro-Kachari organisations did not receive an adequate response from the government. Scholars who have reviewed the original report of the Commission suspect foul play by the Assamese member responsible for collecting the memoranda from the organisations. Nonetheless, the memorandum submitted by the provincial government addressed some of the Boro grievances.

The Government of India Act 1935 sowed the seeds of political aspirations among the Bodos and other backward tribes in Assam by providing for the reservation of six seats in the Provincial Assembly for the Plains Tribes. The 1937 General Election marked a historic moment for the Tribal League, as five representatives from the League were elected to the Provincial Legislature, enabling them to voice the concerns and demands of the tribal people within the Assembly.

In his speech during the Assam Legislative Assembly Proceedings (ALAP) on August 5, 1937, Rupnath Brahma raised the issue of preserving the "Line System," citing the example of erstwhile Goalpara: "Many tribal people in Goalpara have been compelled to leave their homes and settle elsewhere."

Consequently, he and his colleagues from the Tribal League were able to discern the treacherous intentions of the Muslim League regarding the 'Line System'. Thus, the Tribal League supported the Indian National Congress (INC) and played a crucial role in opposing the Muslim League, leading to the government's downfall on 13th September 1938. This event significantly contributed to the INC's victory, led by Gopinath Bardoloi, on 19th September 1938.

In recognition of his efforts, Rupnath Brahma was appointed as the Minister of Forest and Registration, representing the Tribal League. During his presidency of the All-Assam Plains Tribal League, he submitted a memorandum to His Excellency the Viceroy, expressing that the proposed grouping of Assam with Bengal had understandably generated widespread disapproval and resentment among the tribal people of Assam, who were unanimously opposed to this inclusion.

Rupnath Brahma expressed his disappointment that authorities had neglected the education of the region's backward tribal

populations. During his speech at the Assam Legislative Assembly Proceedings (ALAP) on 18th February 1938, he highlighted his concern that the government had failed to allocate funds for the Plain Tribal people in that year's budget, despite their status as the most disadvantaged group in the region. He stated, "If there is no definite move from the government for the education of these people, then I think all nation-building projects will be left far behind in Assam." Having studied in a Bengali-medium school, Rupnath Brahma recognised that due to the Treaty of Yandaboo, Bengali remained the medium of instruction until 1872. Although Assamese was later reintroduced, many schools in lower Assam continued to use Bengali as the primary language of instruction. Consequently, Rupnath Brahma, alongside Kalicharan Brahma and Sarat Goswami, tirelessly advocated for the implementation of Assamese as the medium of instruction in erstwhile Goalpara, seeking to replace the dominant Bengali medium of the time.

Rupnath Brahma had the opportunity to serve the underprivileged and marginalised tribal communities when he became a member of the Advisory Committee of the Minority Sub-Committee, commonly known as the Bardoloi Sub-Committee, established on 27th February 1947. As a member of these committees, he successfully secured various facilities from the Central Government aimed at benefiting the tribal population. Additionally, as a member of the Assam Tribal and Excluded Areas Sub-Committee, he provided significant contributions to their work. Notably, the present Sixth Schedule of the Constitution of India was introduced following the recommendations made by this sub-committee.

The Tribal League was established in 1933, led by Rupnath Brahma and Rabi Chandra Kachari. In 1937, the Muslim League proposed a resolution to abolish the Line System. Rabi Chandra Kachari and Rupnath Brahma, as members of the Tribal League, opposed this resolution, which was ultimately withdrawn. The Tribal League contended with the Muslim League, led by Maulavi Saiyid Muhammad Saadulla, in the Assam Legislative Assembly from 1937 to 1946. Following independence, the Tribal League allied with the Indian National Congress under the leadership of Gopinath Bodoloi.

IV. Conclusion:

Finally, Assam became a part of the Indian Union only after a tug-of-war between the Congress and Tribal League versus Muslim League. Mohammad Ali Jinnah made strong claims for the



state's inclusion in Pakistan but tenacious opposition from the Congress leadership in the state with Mahatma Gandhi's direct support saved Assam from joining Pakistan. The Assam Congress's determined opposition ensured that the arrangement did not take off. The Cabinet Mission may have sought to preserve the unity of India, but it compromised with the Muslim League on the inclusion of Assam, a Hindu majority province, in Pakistan.

In February 1946, Pethic Lawrence, the then secretary of state for India, circulated a note on the viability of Pakistan. In the note, he mentioned that Assam, due to economic, defence and financial considerations, was to form part of East Pakistan. The Assamese were aghast and felt this was a clever British ploy to keep their commercial interests intact. The Cabinet Mission sought to camouflage its real intention by keeping the grouping clause vague and created an impression that they were not serious about exerting pressure on Assam in consonance with the Muslim League's demand.

On May 16, 1946, the Cabinet Mission recommended that Assam and Bengal be tagged together to frame the provisional constitutions for the provinces. The Mission laid stress on provincial autonomy and viewed that every province be constituted on a linguistic and cultural basis. The recommendation came by despite the appearance of Assam Premier Gopinath Bardoloi before the Mission. Bardoloi said, "Assam had always been a separate state with a distinctive identity and must be allowed to remain in India under a provincial status." However, Saadullah, leader of the Muslim League in the Assam Assembly, suggested that the province could be attached to Bengal. This helped Lawrence in forming a belief that Assam had such a close connection with Bengal that its separation from Bengal was impossible. The Assam Pradesh Congress Committee was taken aback to find the Cabinet Mission toeing Saadullah's line by tagging Assam along with Bengal. The APCC felt that small provinces like Assam would be forced to accept a dispensation which would largely be determined by the majority of another province. But the Congress leadership seemed to treat Assam's case on a low key. It perhaps apprehended that taking up the issue at that stage might result in confusion and a stalemate of the larger priority of India's freedom. It was thanks to Gandhi's support that the Congress Working Committee adopted a more responsible attitude to the Assam problem. It was only because of the contributions made by Gopinath Bordoloi, Rupnath Brahma and other tribal leaders that Assam was prevented from becoming a part of Pakistan.

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